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By Reid Wright

CARLSBAD — When veterans of the U.S. armed forces living in Carlsbad need to see a doctor, it is no easy task.

Many aging veterans must travel to make the nearly 600 mile round trip to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Albuquerque. Appointments often take months of waiting to get, and require veterans to stay overnight.

But it is not just the veterans who experience the inconvenience.

Those who cannot drive must enlist the help of others for transportation. Some veterans are fortunate enough to have a family member or fellow veteran able to drive them. Others pool their resources for a van and driver. One Carlsbad veteran said he had to hire a taxi for the trip.

But veteran's drivers and caregivers also require travel and lodging expenses.

The time, effort and costs involved with just getting to the hospital for treatment can be discouraging for the community's aging veterans.

"It literally comes down to whether or not they can afford to pay for a trip to the VA hospital," said U.S. Rep. Harry Teague D-New Mexico, a member of the Veteran's Affairs Committee.

The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act was signed into law May 5. Authored by Teague, the bill expands health care and transportation funding not only for veterans, but for caregivers, who may now be reimbursed for their travel expenses and lodging.

"There's going to be a lot of other things available to the caregiver," Teague said.

Caregivers may now be eligible for training, mental health counseling, financial stipends and in-home respite care to allow them to take time off.

Further, the bill expands care for female veterans, which are now estimated to number nearly 2 million.

"The VA is finally starting to understand," Teague said. "There's almost 2 million women veterans their health care needs are different they need to be provided different."

Lastly, the bill is also designed to offer assistance to homeless veterans, expands studies on veteran suicide, increases referrals for post traumatic stress disorder and provides in-home nursing to veterans from the Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars exposed to unique chemical agents.

Now that the bill has been signed into law, Teague for feedback on how it should be enacted internally. He was in Carlsbad Saturday getting feedback from local veterans.

American Legion Commander Mario Salinas expressed gratitude to Teague and asked him a number of questions regarding the details of the bill.

"I want to thank you for all your input that you put into this act, especially your caregiver provisions. That part will really assist the rural vets, who have to travel long distances," he said.

Still, services for local veterans have a long way to go. After being passed to the Senate, limitations were placed on the bill specific to certain wars the veteran served in. And Carlsbad remains isolated from veteran's health care providers.

The city of Carlsbad rivals Silver City as the farthest from the state VA hospital, Teague said.

Carlsbad veterans asked Teague why there was not a clinic closer to them. Teague said the biggest need he saw was clinic in Roswell, which he said was one of the few cities of that size in New Mexico without a clinic.

Sgt. Ernesto Torres, a disabled Vietnam veteran, asked Teague if he could go to the VA hospital in El Paso, Texas.

Teague said a VA hospital is available in El Paso for Carlsbad Veterans, but he had heard mixed reviews as to its quality and available services in comparison to the one in Albuquerque.

There is also no veteran center in Carlsbad.

"Medical care has improved so much all over the country and now the small communities like Carlsbad and Hobbs and Roswell really do have quality healthcare available," Teague said. "That's something else that we're going to continue to push for — is the fee-based services, so you can get that fee-based service here, so you can get whatever you need in the town that you live in. It's a process that we work on all the time."

Veterans with questions and concerns may contact Teague's helpline at (888) 9-TEAGUE.